

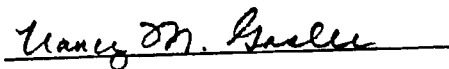
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Charlene M. Horak entitled, "From This Small Place." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

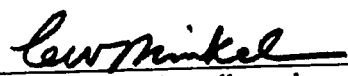

Dr. Marilyn Kallét, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:





Accepted for the Council:


Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

From This Small Place

**A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Charlene M. Horak
December 1995**

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An earlier version of "Doyle to Holmes" originally appeared in *The Baker Street Journal*.

Abstract

This collection contains poems of personal narrative and observation. The first section contains poems of reaching, questioning, and observation. Poems in the second section deal with the emotions of relationships and the places to which they lead. The last section contains poems of reconciliation.

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Introduction

This collection of poems emerged primarily from the past four years. For me, poetry has been a way to express what is difficult and sometimes impossible to express elsewhere. Words come from the need for release, to make the intangible voice tangible. In the words of Linda McCarriston, poetry is for some “the only avenue to speak the truth—with power. . . . Poetry allows one to speak with a voice of power that is not in fact granted to one by the culture.” Writing is discovery, unearthing what is often unknown until it appears on the page. It is this potential for discovery that imbues poetry with its insistent nature that has become an essential, for me, and many others.

Reading poetry is the starting point; as Robert Bly has said, “Writing always begins with reading.” In recent years, I’ve drawn inspiration mainly from contemporary American poets. Stanley Plumly’s quiet metaphorical narrative was a beginning for me, his skillful use of the idiom one that I return to often. I admire in Mary Oliver’s work her ability to capture sensuous beauty in the most common places and events. Through Tess Gallagher, I have learned that grieving belongs in poetry, that, in fact, it belongs there perhaps more than anywhere else. I have found spiritual renewal in Joy Harjo’s poetry, with its unique vision and understanding of the world and the processes that are a part of it.

Most influential on me has been the sometimes painfully honest yet liberating poetry of Galway Kinnell. More than his particular style of writing, it is Kinnell’s approach to poetry that has influenced my own, his inclusion of everything in every experience, no matter how frightening, unpleasant, or ecstatic. When asked about the presence of personal moments in poetry, Kinnell responded that he believes those moments belong in poetry, that those intimate times in our lives are usually the most important and that what we experience in them is of necessity more complex and crucial than what we experience outside of them. Consequently, if we can illuminate those private

times by finding the universal within them, we have gained insight. I believe the key to this illumination is the ability to speak the truth.

More than any other literary age, speaking the truth is the heart of today's poetic culture and could be considered the mantra of the current renaissance in American poetry. Whatever ancillary purpose or effect a work may have, truth is the platform on which many of today's poets stand. Describing the process he goes through when writing poems, Robert Haas says, "You follow the music for a while, and then another voice comes in and says 'Tell the truth.' " When asked what the job or responsibility of the poet is, Michael Harper replied, "to tell the truth, no matter what." In her latest collection of poems, *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, Joy Harjo states her belief that "the word poet is synonymous with truth-teller." I believe that whatever a poet's truth is, whatever the elements of life that become the poet's material are what must be spoken. Nothing can be excluded; we can't edit the content, only the words.

Discussing her poems that are "painful to read and painful to hear," Linda McCarriston voices what she believes poetry is: "Poetry is about saying what we don't want to know. . . . about saying the unsayable. Poetry is about real life. . . . about what kills us and what doesn't kill us. It's about what keeps us alive." Many of the poems in this collection emerged from an effort to look honestly at what kills us and what doesn't, what keeps us alive, and how to know the difference. Some of these efforts reached a moment of reconciliation, others did not. I like to think, however, that within each poem is at least a moment of truth.

*So it surprises me now to hear
the steps of my life following me—*

. . . .

*as though a prayer had ended
and the changed
air between the palms goes free
to become the glitter
on common things that inexplicably shine.*

Galway Kinnell

I

***The Rumbling Sky,
Rain-Soaked Pines***

Outside

light begins
filtered through leaves
larger than my hand
then through thick-stained
church-window glass.
When it reaches me
it's shadow,
within its sphere
a water cricket
clings to the wall,
has for two days.

Faith is not something I have known.
Everything I know I have seen:
a raindrop on the rim of a rose petal.
I want to believe every star is fire
and burns that far away.
I want to know God there.

I'm afraid to find out
God is Jehovah and male.
I don't want to know God through fear,
I'm afraid of so many things
that aren't God.
I want to know light
separated though a ficus leaf,
a spider's web
prismed on the floor.

Reaching

Caged birds
sit at the edge
looking out
waiting for what they know
—carrot tops and millet—
never going out
even when the door is left open.
This morning they get kiwi
and moving back and forth
in constant chatter
go near it
but don't touch.

At the window's edge,
coleus, pale green
with fire inside
push against the glass
to the light,
sun-warmed stems
growing between blinds,
silent moving to
the untouched outside.

Becoming

Shards of light warming pale sandstone
almost hidden in the dunes,
lost in the shadow of larger rocks
waiting to be washed out with the tide
or crushed beneath a booted foot.

I could entice crabs to the stone
silent sunbathers clinging to the sea's veranda
their crooked, translucent legs kingly in the light.

I could draw gulls too
alternately perched like brazen demigods
staring out to sea,
and then like mothers,
heads bobbing, pecking at the rocks and weeds

until the sky turns red, then black
and the stone is cold.

Newt Mother

She moves, dinosaur-like
ripe with life
her swollen belly dragging
on the pebble-covered glass.
I've heard that sometimes
a hybrid will lay eggs
then give birth to a fully formed
prehistoric beast—
no evolving
honest-to-goodness birth,
real babies coming into life
not much different from
the way they leave it,
all that changing in between
like the moon's
waxing and waning,
lovely illusion.

In the garden

when the corn plant breaks at the base
leaves torn away,
brushing the dirt from the stalk
exposes a pale, yellow core,
one thick root with no beginning
no tentacled mass below
spreading into long fuses.

Covered with soil again and watered
color deepens in the stalk, green returns,
like a certain strain of salamander
that can regenerate a lost tail, foot, or leg.

Your Eighty-Fifth Birthday

Listening to you sleep
was the high point of the day,
your rhythmic breathing
a counterpoint to the
breeze through the shutters
and the steady ticking
of an antique clock,
its passing from you to me
one more flux in time.
This steady downward
pull of a mechanism
more reliable than the stars
has become a necessity,
an external heartbeat
from one generation to the next,
a passing of darkness
in the late morning warmth
and sun-lit dust.

Wildflowers

This room is stasis,
the only change the browning
of weekly cut wildflowers,
even their wilting a constant.
Natural motions are stilled
in the lack of breeze
through the open window,
in the panoramic photograph
of the Panama Canal—
a battleship and its escort forever
crossing a bend in the waterway.
From here I can just see the ocean,
a thin green line beneath vast blue,
no smell of salt, no roar of waves
only the drying of purple weeds
you picked alone for years, then picked with me,
ragged blooms you no longer know.

Chickamauga

On Snodgrass Hill, no natural hush
could stop the flow of blood.
Chickamauga's sated now.
Birds sing here. And days that would

bring angry men don't come here.
A man of stone stands firm
with sword and both fists gone.
Could be his stance affirms

this calm is worth two hands
where once a man or boy had stood
shooting a Spencer's blackened fire
into the breaths below.

From seven states, into the fray,
farmhands were led, new boys
who must have loved the rain
until it came sheathed in lead.

Pink skies

and gray-fogged distances
always reward my waking
yet I dread their coming.
If I went to sleep with the sun
perhaps I wouldn't mind rising with it.
I think it's because of the walls, the doors
that keep me from the outside gray
when it comes.
Even windows separate
increase the distance
keep me from what's out there.

Awakening

Where do you run when God comes as terror in the night,
when comfort once spoken in the back of the mind
turns in condemnation?

What does it mean to have heard
too many truths for too many years,
when the mind holds only truths
and the hierarchy of truth breaks down.

The world envies, expects to hear
the private truths of self-acceptance and love.
At the dinner table, after grace,
my truth was broken down
by voices that see only one truth.
They speak in an unknown tongue
of their love for me, birds, the sky.

If we lie to appease those we love
what unpardonable sin have we committed.
I believe God must respect the forthright atheist for her ethics,
the floundering agnostic for his wish to believe.
Blind faith must be a virtue unparalleled in this world.

I am thankful home is within me—
not in the places I grew up
in faces I've seen throughout my life
in deeds, whether good or misjudged, I can never forget
not anywhere that can be lost with
one change in landscape, death, or loss of memory—
but a quiet place in the heart that sometimes swells
encompassing all the body.

We reach a place where we can never go back.
That awakening is the end of more than innocence
the beginning of a journey filled with light,
darkness, and everything in between.

The Crow

The crow calls an insistent reminder
of place and time, here and now,
of all that lives in this moment
demanding submission of the past
of what it could have led to.

The crow calls without apology or conscience.
Salvation lies behind that voice of pure need and inquiry.
She comes everyday with the same demand
receives from a distant voice the same.
Their black-coated fearlessness dominates the sky
its home of wind-soaked pines.

II

The Sound of Running Water

Bridge

*On how many
Bridges have I trampled
The fallen cherry blossoms?*

Su Man Shu

I had not thought of life as a bridge
yet the metaphor seems
more apt than any other.
I've known few remarkable ones
the greatest being the one
from aloneness with you
to aloneness without you.

Running Water

I live where the sound of
running water never stops
sparrows light continuously
and you never come.

Waiting

Emotions this chaotic must
disperse, begin linear flow
before they can be
funneled into words.
Leaves that one by
one turn to rust
fall into a new landscape,
having become without notice
something unrecognizable to an
old life that curls up and hides
before the storm that doesn't come.

This is the dangerous calm
before nothingness
when comprehension has no depth
the senses, no surface.
Positive and negative lose conviction,
no clash, no lightning
only the hair-raised silence
and unnerved calm that wait
for rain to come.

Distance

You distance yourself with words
or lack of them.
You won't call it *making love*
we have *intercourse*
and when we do
you don't say my name
you don't say anything.
Only when you're in my mouth
trying to lose yourself, trying to let go
you speak an abstract thank you
to *Mary, Christ, Sweet Jesus*.
This must make me God
give me power, fulfill me.

Absence

When you don't touch me
even with your mind
I fill your place with
every pleasure
I can find without you
to convince myself I can
and do.

Love

Weeks of pained separation closed
into nothing as we rekindled our love
under trees by the water
in your newly acquired rocker
and finally in bed.

More frequent separation
the furnishings would not survive.
For each of us there seems no limit
like the cat that returns to nuzzle
the leg of the foot that kicked it.

Knowing

The way you laughed
while rolling away from me
pulling the covers around you,
was your gift of knowing
how to make me laugh,
a laugh that digs deep now,
like that obscene, twisted hook
used to pull the cores out of
wormy crab apples that
can't be eaten afterward.

In this quiet place

your voice still sounds.
Having been in every room
it's with me always
even when you're not here.
To not hear you requires
a room you haven't touched
where I am someone else,
a city where you are
someone I've never known
but have dreamed of all my life
who speaks the right words
that soon live in every room
even when you're not there.

Rainwater

There is a time when staring
through the grayness of the rain
is the only important thing.
With rainwater come prisms of light
appearing briefly when the angles are right.
If you hold the light bent through glass
and bend it again, it divides
returns to itself, becomes false.
The light has more secrets than Houdini.
Today, I am one of them.

From This Small Place

Ask me how I've hurt you
I've infinite answers.
Ask me how I've hurt myself
I am dumb.

From this small place
wounds are salved
and without voice.
Raindrops scorched by sun
have taken away
more than they know.
Autumn winds hold
no portent for me.
Returned to a familiar, distant
equilibrium, I am home
not so much found as opened.

In this small place
yesterday survives
as weakened needles cling
to pines through winter.
Grief I've given
cannot be changed by words.
I've put you in a three-lock box
cast you to the sea.
I cannot leave you open
as I am open,
this overpowers us both
roses snuffed
by orange blossom,
coral swallowed by sea.

III

Waking

Waking

to you massaging the backs of my arms and legs
is like watching the sun rise
forgetting the moment it will cease
to be sunrise and become another day.

Happiness has begun to include everything
early morning tea
pruning violets
gathering sheets dried in the sun.

Closeness waits in every moment
around every corner, as if the
proximity we share even when apart
radiates into everything else.

I try to pinpoint when this began
when a day between visits
wasn't the beginning of fear
but content reflection,

mornings in the shower,
soap-filled hands like tongues
on chests and arms, bending
to reach lower parts, legs, and feet.

I used to believe you had never loved
because you didn't love as I demanded,
your face innocence personified
lost in having given all it knew.

Today I hold onto you
as some sweet expectation,
embrace without fear
the grace and joy of wanting.

Bird Watching

It started with the arrival
of huge brown birds
who shook the feeder
as they ate
and when looked at
through binoculars
turned out to be squirrels.
"Bird watching is more listening
than looking," you say.
So we put down the glasses
and listen.

You identify each new call
or bit of song,
woodpecker, sparrow, wren.
What delight
if we could call
each other as clearly.

Modesty

It's unbelievable that we've still so much of it.
At our age, there can't possibly
be anything left to blush at.
Our equality of modesty binds us to each other,
exhibitionists and the unabashed
having had no lasting effect on either of us.

Muddy Pond

It's an apt name
for the Mennonite town
where dirt from unpaved roads
covers everything.
Beneath a dust-covered cap
a boy feeds the sorghum press,
his upper body moving rhythmically
with the horses working the press
that releases a bright green liquid.
A nearby kitchen swells
with the damp smell of the tart liquid
boiling in a closed room.
Somewhere in between
it becomes thick, brown, and oversweet.
Could be the prayer
of a small, grim woman
in the corner that makes it so.
I like to think it's
a secret incantation
spoken to the devil,
an exchange of a town's soul
for the anointing of sweet.

Morning

As I lie awake
contemplating walls,
within their covered cage
birds chirp softly
sensing I'm awake.
They wait to be uncovered
before they sing full voice
even as the eastern light
brightens through paned glass.
Bliss, this incomprehensible politeness.

Albino Squirrel

He appears beneath heavily bloomed mimosa
always alone, darts from the center of the clearing
to the edge of the low-lying branches.
He jumps straight up into pink masses,
three, four times until catching hold.
Three entrances, and he never returns,
this ghost squirrel spawned from summer heat
nature's apparition sent to draw the mind from idleness.

Bootless Verse

Do you know what it's like to grasp in vain
for a quiet place when you need one most,
when every corner of the room, the house,
the world beats with thumps the wrong way,
when every obnoxious sound runs rampant.
Wordsworth had lakes and softly running brooks.
Dickinson had years of wooded walks.
Though she often had to wait
for midnight pause to pen her thoughts in rhyme.
I wonder if she sometimes sat on the edge
of inspiration with farcical scenes
and witless lines coming to mind.
As for me, I cannot write a thing today
but wicked, bootless verse.

Doyle to Holmes

I've written you off
the trains and into
the country bogs.
I've carried you by
carriage through city
fogs that cling
with clammy wetness to
cracked, red-bricked walls.
I've raised you from
a schooled wit who
sits and observes with
gravest ritual
to a man who with some
internal key can
unpuzzle the black
from the slack of a
pip or twisted lip.
I've killed you, returned
you, hounded and bound
you. But mostly, I've
been with you. And with
him, your eternal,
long-suffering friend.
He and I are doctors,
but you and I
take the powdery cure.
How can we ever know
for sure where I stop
and you begin. Or where
you will end?

Eloquence

comes only when
you've stopped snoring
and my sleeping pill
has begun to take effect.
I want my mind dead-pan,
but it won't quit.
I get up and scrawl out
in the dark.
It pours out
dark, dumb, and large—
the answer to the riddle
you asked this morning,
a grocery list for the
next two months,
three poems,
names for six children,
three cats, and a dog.
It's all good.

Bug Belches

You've heard them,
those turn-your-head sounds
that keep you company
as you sit on the porch
absorbing the breeze
smelling honeysuckle and lilac,
not wanting to get up and go in.

Eventually you do get up,
the bug belches get up
and go inside too
because they have a way
of staying with you,
like flowers and schemes that
come again each spring
and sometimes stay a while.

Vita

Charlene Horak was born in 1964 in Knoxville, Tennessee. As an undergraduate, she majored in English with concentrations in creative writing and technical writing. She graduated with high honors from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in August 1989. Since that time she has worked as a technical writer and editor for Lockheed Martin Energy Systems at Oak Ridge National Laboratory. In 1991, she began graduate studies on a part-time basis at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. In December 1995, she received an M.A. in English, with a concentration in creative writing.

In 1989, she received second prize for traditional forms of poetry in The University of Tennessee English Department's undergraduate writing competition and honorable mention in the Student Writer's Association competition. Her work has appeared in *Cicada* and *The Baker Street Journal*.